STATE LEADERSHIP TEAM REVIEW
AUGUST 1-3, 2006
AREA 2 QUESTIONS/CONCERNS

❖ MANAGEMENT & ADMINISTRATION

- Improve work organization, operating procedures and techniques

COMMENT: Electronic Directives - return to a hard copy in each office.

RESPONSE: We will continue to provide electronic directives only. Offices are welcome to print a hard copy if needed.

COMMENT: Electronic Directives System is still cumbersome. After reading a portion of a directive, the user is kicked back to square one. To get the next bulletin you have to start back through the my.NRCS website.

RESPONSE: I have sent a message to the technical team at my.NRCS to inquire as to why this is happening to the employee and determine if there is a solution. I have canvassed the State office and no one has had this problem. The Electronic Directives system (eDir) has a number of known performance issues and will be replaced by a new version later this year. A suggestion for the meantime, try navigating to the eDir site directly (not thru my.NRCS). To do this, open a new Internet Explorer browser window and enter http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/ in the address line.

Specific questions about eDir should be directed to eDir support at edir@ftc.usda.gov.

COMMENT: When changes are made to a manual, there is no dating system in place. It is very difficult to determine if a change to the manual was made before or after a contract was signed, since the date changes are not attached to pages.

RESPONSE: The State office will ensure that dates appear on all manual changes.

COMMENT: Reference documents and how-to instruction manuals continue to be needed for accessing and using electronic processes, such as PCMS, records management, travel vouchers, procurement, ICAMS and WebTCAS, etc.

RESPONSE: Staff is looking into developing a shorter version of the current instructions for the mentioned programs.

- ✓ PCMS has a training manual that is located on the USDA web site.
- ✓ Records management is in the General Manual.
- ✓ A shortened version on the steps to submit travel vouchers was presented to the SCEPs during orientation. This will be further developed and put on our website.
- ✓ Contracting is developing procedures for procurement
- ✓ Currently, iCAMS is not useful to an employee. The only use of iCAMS is for Human Resources.

- ✓ WebTCAS has a tutorial online available to employees. We will look into simpler steps for processing.

COMMENT: When Bulletins and Tech Note notifications are sent out, could a short descriptive Subject Heading be added? Without a heading that tells what the bulletin or Tech Note is about, we have trouble trying to relocate it even though we know it was mailed out.

RESPONSE: Every section will ensure that a heading is included on all email notices and on State directives system.

COMMENT: Provide notification to the field when documents on eFOTG have been updated. A folder providing a brief synopsis of the changes and the date the changes were made could be added to eFOTG. NRCS, partners, and consultants could access this folder to determine what has changed.

RESPONSE: New tech notes and changes to eFOTG are listed for 60 days already. Each tech note has an abstract that describes what has changed.

COMMENT: I believe there would be value in having inquiries, requests for assistance, requests for information, bulletins, etc. reviewed by an appropriate specialist at the Area or Field level before being sent to the Field offices. This would help to alleviate problems with policy needing revision almost the same day the policy is created.

RESPONSE: This comment was unclear. The Area Conservationists will discuss with staff and field to determine recommended communication procedures.

COMMENT: Better, timelier communication from the State office. Sometimes I think folks are so familiar with a topic and have discussed it for so long and also probably have discussed the topic with a couple of DCs that they start to think everyone is familiar with the topic and in the know. This is not always the case.

> Example: When do we send out deferment letters for EQIP? It is probably assumed by SO Staff that when the money has been swept, deferment letters should be mailed. But is this really the case or should the SO or AO be sending a notice telling the FOs to submit deferment letters? FOs are not aware of money that may be acquired from other states.

RESPONSE: In this instance, the Colorado FY06 EQIP Implementation Schedule targeted May 31, 2006, as the date deferment letters were scheduled to be sent. This will be revisited in future schedules to allow flexibility for later-cycled program funds received from other states. Overall communications will be addressed at future leadership meetings.

- Establish priorities & concentrate time & effort on high priority work

  COMMENT: Does the State office have a list of priorities for the whole State? I would like to suggest to our State office Leadership Team to come up with a list of goals for the State of Colorado for FY 2007 in order to help us people in the Field office manage our heavy workload.

  RESPONSE: We do have targeted special emphasis areas that have been in place for several years. We will further define priorities and goals during our State level business planning session in October 2006.

❖ SUPERVISION & TRAINING

- Training

  COMMENT: Can a web-based refresher course be developed for ProTracts?

  RESPONSE: There is online help available through my.NRCS that has step-by step-instructions. Also, some specific State guidance could be built. Keep in mind that new functionality is being added to ProTracts this coming fiscal year, more complete online training is expected.

  COMMENT: With the increase of appeal cases, is training needed to assist the field staff in preparing for the appeal?

  RESPONSE: A request has been made to Beth Schuler, NRCS HQ, to provide comprehensive appeals training to SO programs and Area office staff. Training has been requested for this coming winter. Once complete, District Conservationists may receive training based on the requests from their ACs.

  COMMENT: The present training request and approval procedure must be streamlined. This process has become very cumbersome, with what seems to be an emphasis on getting the proper paperwork filed.

  RESPONSE: Human Resources are developing a bulletin to put all training in AgLearn. This will simplify the process by eliminating the paper copy. AgLearn will also force the direct supervisor to approve the request before the class is processed. This will help address the supervisor not knowing when their employees are attending a class. They will be notified when a request has been made.

  COMMENT: The concept of the “Boot Camp” style training is good, but taking personnel out of Field offices for six weeks during our heavy workload periods just gives the perspective that what is important to the Field offices (and our customers) is not important to NHQ. They must consider Field office workload periods when setting up training.

RESPONSE: At this point, AgLearn schedules all of the Boot Camp sessions. Each employee sends us their first and second choice of destinations. However, the availability of day care in only two locations limits some to their choice of destination. Once AgLearn has determined the date of a session, the employee that requested a specific location is automatically assigned to that class. Since this is a mandatory class, they are not looking at the workload or if the employees attending all come from the same office. On the next round of employees, the DC can request the employees to select different locations for the class; therefore, ensuring that they will not attend at the same time.

The National Employee Development Center (NEDC) is doing a through evaluation of Boot Camp and will be making adjustments to improve.

- Staff Management

COMMENT: The Field offices have increased workload with reduced staff, are there plans to address this concern?

RESPONSE: Yes, we are looking at staffing relative to workload; this will be further expressed during the Accountability Based Cost (ABC) accounting that is scheduled for early FY07.

Each Area Conservationist is developing new staffing plans and will collectively meet with the State Conservationist to determine future direction.

We have attempted to utilize a variety of means to provide additional staff at lower cost to the Agency, such as conservation technicians, Ultima contract employees. We will be focusing our next efforts on how to reduce administrative workload at the Field.

COMMENT: It seems like the Agency is getting away from hiring new Technicians the last 10 years, and they are still needed in the Field offices to provide assistance on engineering practices and especially help the Area and State Engineers with the planning, surveying, designing, and constructions checks of the CNMP practices. There should be greater emphasis by the State office Leadership Team in the hiring and placing of soil conservation technicians ASAP in an office, such as the Sterling Field office, and let them train under a senior technician before they retire. If we don't, we are going to lose our technical expertise as an Agency at the local Field office level.

RESPONSE: We agree that technicians are a critical aspect of our workforce in getting quality conservation on the ground. We are trying to supplement technicians numbers by utilizing a cooperative arrangement with matching State and local dollars. We have allowed for placing technicians to be trained in locations where an experienced technician is approaching retirement.

Area Conservationists will evaluate numbers and locations for NRCS technicians as part of their overall staffing plan

COMMENT: SCEPs and STEPs – Is there a way to improve new students access to the computer and to E-Authentication?

RESPONSE: Human Resources will notify the student on the Monday after they are paid to provide them with the information they need in order to apply for their e-authentication account. It is the information that is on their pay that is needed to submit this application. The student has a short window to go in and enter this information. If the information is not entered during this time limit, the student must wait for another pay period, due to their pay changing, to apply. This process was explained in the DC handbook and the student handbook.

For the 2007 SCEP season, we are developing training for the DCs. This procedure will be addressed, as well as the request to enable students on their return. Human Resources is also addressing their procedure in notifying the student and will be required to follow up with each individual to verify that they have completed their application and received their e-authentication account. This was discussed briefly at the Efficiency workshop held in St Louis. Jack Carlson is aware of the overall issues with e-authentication access and they are contemplating some changes.

- Communication between employees & organizational levels

COMMENT: We need better communication between SO and field employees.

COMMENT: Lack of information provided to Field Offices prior to implementing practices, forms, or programs.

> Examples: Little information was provided to the Field Offices on the procedures, practices, cost-share, ranking & screening information for the Invasive Plant Program-EQIP until after proposals were funded. This proved to be a huge barrier in promoting this program to potential participants because we lacked the supporting information.

RESPONSE: The 2006 Invasive Plant Species EQIP RFP was a first time effort to address a natural resource concern. There is an ongoing effort to evaluate the 2006 program and determine areas of success and where improvement can be made. This comment raises a valid point that will be considered in the RFP evaluation.

❖ CONSERVATION PLANNING & APPLICATION

- Maintain productivity without sacrificing quality

COMMENT: The prescribed grazing standard/specifications needs to be revised and several of the attached forms need to be revised.

RESPONSE: Effectively using templates (was covered in training) has been shared. Area 2 has set up templates in all offices, training has been provided and support is available for follow-up assistance. National standard is currently being reviewed. Once the new standard is final, the State office will develop the State standard and update specs and forms.

COMMENT: There is inadequate time to do a good planning job on rangeland and there is inadequate follow-up on the range units. More time should be allowed to get it right the first time and that will lead to time savings down the road, as well as something that is good for the land, land user, and everyone.

RESPONSE: Agree –Herman Garcia will conduct a meeting with all the multi-county rangeland mgt. specialists and develop suggested streamlined methods.

COMMENT: In regard to general Conservation planning, Field offices should be given one set of digital data to work from within Toolkit, which encompasses all information needed to develop plan maps, soil maps, and soil descriptions. When a person logs into Toolkit, there should be one folder or template set up which provides for easy access to all needed data from the mapping tool. Technology personnel could set up Toolkit to be ready-to-go with such data. This would make the learning curve much less of a challenge for existing and new employees.

RESPONSE: The Agency is working toward this.

COMMENT: Can the standard and specifications web-based access be improved? It is slow to load up.

RESPONSE: That is an IT issue; however, there is a National team that has submitted eFOTG improvement recommendations to the National leadership. The recommendations include easier access to Section IV eFOTG.

COMMENT: Can we have standards and specs informal word documents on the web and not as scanned old documents? Printing is sometimes difficult and old documents do not come out looking professional.

RESPONSE: As standards/specs/job sheets are updated, each specialist will create new forms that are printable. Most of the scanned standards are older and are scheduled to be updated.

COMMENT: Could a listing of all directives, technical notes, considerations, etc. be included with the standard and specification? This would help in the decision-making process of choosing the best practice for a resource concern.

RESPONSE: This request has been forwarded to all the ECS specialists for consideration. We may develop a spreadsheet with such a listing. It is a maintenance issue as tech notes and directives change on a regular basis.

COMMENT: Can instructions be put out on how to make the standards and specifications a direct link from a desk top icon?

RESPONSE: Yes, we have developed instructions for three desktop icons to get you to the Colorado eFOTG Map; to Section I, Table of Contents; and to Section IV, Table of Contents for the Standards, Specifications, Worksheets, Documents guides. The Table of Contents contains active links to the information posted to these sections.

Instructions for creating a shortcut that is a link to a website:

1. Begin at the desktop
2. Right click
3. Choose New > Shortcut
4. Type in the web address.

Instructions for creating the desktop icon to take you to the Colorado eFOTG Map:

1. Open the Colorado Home page (*not* through my nrcs.gov use this link: http://www.co.nrcs.usda.gov/)
2. Select: "Technical Resources" at the top of the page, this is the link: http://www.co.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/index.html
3. Select: "eFOTG" (left column)
4. See: Colorado State Map
5. Select: "file" (top of the page)
6. Select: "send"
7. Select: "shortcut to desktop", this will create an icon on your desktop that will take you to the Map.
8. At the Colorado map, select the county
9. You will then be taken to the eFOTG directory.
10. Go to the desktop and rename the icon. *This is the link to the Colorado eFOTG Map:*http://efotg.nrcs.usda.gov/efotg_locator.aspx?map=CO

Instructions for creating the desktop icon to take you to the Colorado eFOTG, Section I, Table of Contents; this includes in alphabetical order TGNs, Technical Notes, Resource Documents, all items posted to Section I:

1. Open the Colorado Home page (*not* through my nrcs.gov)
2. Select: "Technical Resources" at the top of the page
3. Select: "eFOTG" (left column)

4. See: Colorado State Map, select "Colorado on the map"
5. Select: "Section I"
6. Select: "Table of Contents", open
7. Select: "file" (top of the page)
8. Select: "send"
9. Select: "shortcut to desktop". *This is the link to Section IV Table of Contents:*http://efotg.nrcs.usda.gov/toc.aspx?CatID=1430

Instructions for creating the desktop icon to take you to the Colorado eFOTG, Section IV, Table of Contents; this includes in alphabetical order the Standards, Specifications, Worksheets, Document Guides, and all items posted to Section IV:

1. Open the Colorado Home page (*not* through my nrcs.gov)
2. Select: "Technical Resources" at the top of the page
3. Select: "eFOTG" (left column)
4. See: Colorado State Map, select "Colorado on the map"
5. Select: "Section IV"
6. Select: "Table of Contents", open
7. Select: "file" (top of the page)
8. Select: "send"
9. Select: "shortcut to desktop". *This is the link to Section IV Table of Contents:* http://efotg.nrcs.usda.gov/toc.aspx?CatID=1508

COMMENT: Can a help reference be developed for FIRI on proper length of run and soil types? Used to be in the Colorado Irrigation Guide but the new revised version does not have this included.

RESPONSE: Agree that the old tables on length of run, maximum/minimum stream size, etc. that were tied to soil type and intake family were very useful planning tools. Also in agreement that we need to try to determine if it is possible to include them in the next version of the NRCS Colorado Irrigation Guide. However, they were based on soil scientist and engineer analysis, and I don't think the FIRI will be an adequate substitute. We decided to see if we can use the available soil data to re-develop this type of information as a planning tool for flood irrigation systems. Jason Peel is in the process of updating the CO Irrigation Guide. Field offices may contact Jason at 720-544-2817 or email at jason.peel@co.usda.gov for questions on FIRI or any other irrigation technical assistance requests.

COMMENT: Are there plans to put the Colorado Irrigation Guide on the Web?

RESPONSE: Yes! Jason Peel will put the National Irrigation Guide on eFOTG. We will develop Colorado supplements to the National guide and release this information in a Tech Guide Notice.

COMMENT: The importance of early and continued interaction with producers cannot be stressed enough, especially on complex projects like agriculture waste management systems. When the planners and designers listen to the producers objectives, communicate what we can and cannot do, include them in critical decisions, and document their decisions we have found that it produces two positive results:

1. It reduces the time spent modifying designs
2. It provides buy-in by the producer

The immediate and long term benefits to NRCS and to the producers far outweigh the time invested.

RESPONSE: We agree completely with this observation. This should be our current mode of planning with livestock producers. It certainly is the NRCS planning goal. Livestock producers are making important and expensive business decisions, and we need to make sure our planners are working with the landowners to forward resource concerns and management alternatives in sufficient detail to help the producer to make good choices. The producer is always the one making the critical decision and we need to honor their role as the decision maker. We can only hope they take advantage of us as a technical resource as THEY make their management decisions. We are available to offer technical resources and advice to the landowner so they can make informed decisions, and we need to make sure our people are trained and able to provide effective assistance. Hopefully the scheduled training in September will start to address this need.

COMMENT: Could a "CNMP Late" form be developed for the Field offices to use during signups that would bring some of these critical issues to the forefront early in the process?

1. Develop well written sample CNMPs for a feedlot, a dairy, and a horse operation. These sample CNMPs could be posted on eFOTG or hard copies distributed to all Field offices that have an Ag waste workload.
2. CNMPs that have already been written could be used. I would recommend checking them for completeness before they are distributed and ensuring they are carefully written examples.
3. A section which documents the producer's decisions is rarely included. This section MUST be included in any sample CNMP that is distributed. Otherwise, the designer is often forced to spend a significant amount of time in the planning phase.

RESPONSE: There is some current guidance on what is needed for a CNMP, but we have been hearing from a variety of sources it may not be exactly what is wanted as a help tool and thus may not be widely used. Additional CNMP guidance in the form of checklists and example CNMPs is part of the training scheduled for September. Examples will be screened before they go out to make sure they are complete and accurate. A conservation plan should be a record of the cooperator’s decisions. A CNMP should be an RMS conservation plan on an animal feeding operation. Part of the issue may be people rushing through the initial planning phases which may result in weak documentation of the alternatives discussed. When the subsequent specialists are working on the nutrient management plans, engineering designs, etc., there may be a need to evaluate some of the information because the planning phase may not have covered or documented the discussions, alternatives, and decisions fully. We do need to make sure additional planning is a real need and not a perceived need.

COMMENT: Coordinate with CDPHE to clarify changes to current regulations and their implications to confined feeding operations in the future.

RESPONSE: We agree and have been involved with the CDPHE on a number of activities related to their regulations for confined animal feeding operations. The latest initiative is for CDPHE and EPA to develop a consistent unified message about the proposed rule changes. We will continue to follow up with the CDPHE to keep current with the evolving regulations.

❖ CONSERVATION PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

COMMENT: We still are having problems with communication of interpretations of program policy. As Dave Doty stated last year, "*Changes in program procedures are at times contrary to established policy and procedures*." A good example is our recent discussion about recovering liquidated damages from EQIP well retirement contract holders opting to participate in CREP. The appendix promising collection of 20% liquidated damages was clearly explained to the producers when they signed their contracts. In fact, several producers did not sign EQIP contracts because they decided to wait for CREP contracts. If the neighbors received a large payment last year for retiring their well, and then aren't assessed the liquidated damages promised by NRCS, we will not be perceived as treating everyone equally.

RESPONSE: Producers wishing to cancel program contracts need to follow the procedure outlined in the respective appendix. The more documentation provided, the more efficient the processing of the cancellation or termination request will be. District Conservationists need to adequately document the reasons for the contract cancellation or termination, including calculations of cost-share repayment, liquidated damages and interest, and provide supporting cover letter documentation as per the Conservation Program Manual. Client contract holders sign the LTP-153 with the potential calculated cost-share information documented on the form. The State Conservationist has the responsibility to evaluate each LTP-153 request and determine what, if any, actual repayments are warranted. We are following this procedure with CREP.

COMMENT: Another problem is the logjam of LTP-153s sitting at the SO. We have several that have been at the SO since late 2004 awaiting action. If a DC is doing his/her job well, they explain to the producer about liquidated damages and payment re-collections when the contract is signed. When the SO doesn't act on the DCs recommendation that follows policy, it makes the DC look bad. A DC from another Area told me the other day that he doesn't ever want to request liquidated damages when canceling a contract, because he'll just end up with 'egg on his face' if the SO doesn't follow through. We were told repeatedly that liquidated damages would be collected, but as far as I know, there is no good system in place to collect from the producers. (I think that's why there is a lengthy wait for processing the LTP-153s.)

RESPONSE: The backlog of LTP-153 was processed earlier this month. Liquidated damage assessment was part of this process when warranted. Programs staff will be processing LTP-153s on a monthly basis. We are following procedure as described in Conservation Program Management comment "A." A clarification of Colorado policy for a cross programs contract cancellation policy will be forthcoming in the beginning of the new fiscal year. It will reiterate conservation program manual procedure.

COMMENT: Reduce the number of programs so that Field offices can get back to general conservation planning.

RESPONSE: Our "Farm Bill" programs were identified by Congress as a means to help producers implement their conservation plan and practices. It has been recognized nationally that there needs to be a reduction in the number of programs and streamlining of the ones that exist. The next Farm Bill will determine the types, numbers, and levels of funding for future Federal conservation programs.

In Colorado, we hope to move to a more up-front conservation planning prior to the use of programs to help implement these plans.

COMMENT: Going to an incentive base is great for speeding up payments to producer and reducing time to process payments.

RESPONSE: Agree - there is an informational brochure under development that will explain the upcoming changes.

COMMENT: A more effective process needs to be developed to communicate consistent program policy interpretation at the Field level. I find this to be an important point. Often State and Area policy clarification is placed within email content and becomes difficult to retrieve or organize. State level websites could organize by policy type and provide a centralized retrieval mechanism.

RESPONSE: The technology team is developing a Web-based shared drive filing system that will be populated to the Field and Area level. This should help clean-up current policy confusion along with proper dates.

COMMENT: Help the Field offices help producers identify early in the signup process the limitations that will prohibit them from participating in the EQIP program. Common problems we have encountered are:

1. Contracts written on confined feeding operations leasing the land the operation is located on.
2. Contracts written on confined feeding operations that have no spreading acres on which to apply liquid effluent that is generated on their operation.
3. Contracts written on confined feeding operations that have insufficient spreading acres to apply effluent generated by their operation.

As engineers, we have spent many hours trying to figure out ways to produce a working system for operations with these limitations. A lack of understanding by some Field offices has resulted in contracts that should never have been written unless significant changes could be incorporated by the producer BEFORE an EQIP contract is written.

RESPONSE: All the issues identified above should be considered when identifying alternatives during the conservation planning process before a cost-share agreement is ever written. The EQIP animal waste management resource concern screening tool prioritizes projects with adequate CNMPs. The applicant should have a proper CNMP written by NRCS, a TSP, an A&E or other party that identifies the treatment of animal manures and process waste compliant with NRCS and CDPHE requirements. The CNMP is the basis of the animal waste management system cost-share agreement.

We will attempt to address each of these concerns. These items will be discussed at an upcoming CNMP training and with the program staff.

- **CONSERVATION DISTRICT/INTERAGENCY RELATIONS**

  - Employee understanding of how their work will contribute to the delivery of technical assistance and financial assistance to land users through Conservation Districts

COMMENT: When producers complain or contact their congressional representative, your support of the Field offices is greatly appreciated and respected by the field. When this is not done, the message is communicated that the customer is always right and NRCS will do whatever needs to be done to appease them. On the whole, the Field staff strives to understand producer’s goals and meet their needs in a timely manner. Our customers' complaints or assertions are not always right. The way complaints are handled is critical not only to leadership but to the Field staff as well. If errors are noticed, take the time to come along side and help us correct them.

RESPONSE: Fortunately, we have very few congressional inquires or complaints from our clientele. When we do receive a complaint, our first step is to always go back through the Area office to get a response from the Field (or other location) where the complaint originated.

We are expected to provide a formal written response to any congressional inquiry. Our congressional delegation is very understanding at what we do and our excellent reputation for providing customer service.

While we attempt to support the Field and make sure that we deal with “facts,” we will always allow our customers to express their concerns and receive a response to those concerns.

❖ OUTREACH

➢ Public knowledge & understanding of NRCS mission & objectives

COMMENT: What plans are being made to ensure that the large population centers of the Front Range are being told about the work that we do with conservation programs?

RESPONSE: We continue to work with local statewide newspapers and television stations to get our message out to the urban masses. One area we will be able to made strides in is the small acreage landowning outreach program. We will also work closely with a variety of partners and help educate and promote our conservation efforts.

COMMENT: We have snow survey; how can we roll that into more publicity for our other programs?

RESPONSE: Our Snow Survey Program is one of the most visible programs we have. We get continuous television coverage during the snow season. During discussions or interviews with the media concerning snow surveys, NRCS Field staff can use this as a perfect opening into other programs the Agency offers. Especially during these drought years, water shortages are a major consideration for water users. On our tour in Area 2, we saw a demonstration of an EQIP program that would increase irrigation efficiency and extend the landowner's existing water supplies. That's a perfect example of how our Agency not only provides the water supply forecasts, but also helps landowners deal with these shortages. Offer to provide the reporter you're talking with more information about how we help individuals conserve water and other natural resources in your local area.

COMMENT: Looking ahead, our farm operators are aging and new people will be managing the land base. Is this new group the "traditional farmer" we are used to working with? Have there been any efforts by our Agency to establish profiles on these new landowner/operators as to whom they might be and be proactive in our outreach to them as these changes occur?

RESPONSE: This is a great demographic. It is something we will look into to see how we can reach the new landowners and managers.

COMMENT: Could a brochure be developed to clearly communicate the EQIP process from initial inquiry through completed contract? This is important for producers who have not worked with NRCS and the USDA previously. I think of Mr. Microtech or 10 acre forestry owner.

RESPONSE: Yes, we will work with the Programs staff to develop this product. There are programmatic Fact Sheets, Q&As, and Frequently Asked Questions publications available through the NRCS website under the "Programs" tab. Our staff also has the responsibility of explaining basic eligibility and procedural processes to potential clients. For the Forestry resource concern, participants are required to have an approved Ag Forest Management Plan. The Colorado State Forest Service approves Ag Forest

Management Plans. Landowners are required to have a minimum of 40 acres to quality for the Ag Forest Management Plan process.

- **TECHNOLOGY**

COMMENT: There needs to be an updated ProTracts training system for new employees. Seasoned employees still need to be walked through processes that they have not done for awhile. An employee said he had been trained before, but had not done it lately, so he could not remember how to do it. He seemed surprised that it was so easy.

RESPONSE: We probably do need to update and offer additional ProTracts training; Programs have the lead on that. For some of this, again, you can receive online help. It has step-by-step instructions. ProTracts training is available through the ProTracts website. Additional State level training will be forthcoming with the new fiscal year, incorporating ProTracts enhancements developed recently.

COMMENT: ProTracts needs to print the basis on mods prior to approval of the mod. In addition, the initial contract should NOT be changed when a mod is completed. There is no way to see "what was what" prior to the mod being initiated in ProTracts. Just like hard copies in the past, the mod sequence is very important when trying to solve a problem within the contract. This should be available electronically.

RESPONSE: This will be forwarded as a suggestion to the ProTracts staff at ITC. One of the new ProTracts enhancements to be implemented in FY07 is the printing of modification basis prior to approval. Another enhancement is a better history track of prior contract status and changes. Field offices need to print and retain copies of all contracts, including the original and subsequent modifications. This concern will be submitted as a suggestion to the ProTracts staff at ITC.

COMMENT: Mod approval process needs to be at the local level.

RESPONSE: This change is under serious consideration and a more flexible Colorado EQIP contract modification policy is forthcoming.

COMMENT: Much emphasis has been spent on updating digital mapping technology; however, we have yet to get a user-friendly system. When it gets down to it, all the Field office needs from our mapping software is the ability to develop a good plan/soils map, and to perhaps do some inventorying of existing resources. This would not be nearly so hard to access and learn if we could pre-package some of our digital data for easy reference. Some Offices do not agree. We do not want to constrain GIS to just doing plan and soils maps.

COMMENT: There are many engineering programs developed by NRCS personnel, in- and out-of-state, that potentially could save a lot of time for Field office staff. These could be listed, possibly on the Colorado State website under engineering for all NRCS personnel access. Included with the actual program could be a write-up from the developer or Area engineer on its use, limitations, cautions, etc. This way it could be evaluated for the applicability to the specific job being looked at. This site could evolve into many applicable programs and applications.

Example: We found an NRCS pipeline program from Nebraska and it has saved us many steps in pipeline evaluation and a huge amount of time on those specific jobs.

RESPONSE: All software/spreadsheets, etc. approved for general distribution are available on a ftp site.

The address is: ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/CO/ENG/Colorado%20Engineering%20CD/

Approved software/spreadsheets are also distributed through the Area Engineers, and IT has been given a CD containing the software to be loaded on all FO computers. This was discussed at the Area engineers meeting the week of 10/2/06.

COMMENT: The Area and State office resource personnel should have Toolkit training and then be able to access folders when working with a Field office. It would be nice to have more access to Area/State office staff, but that's another point. That assistance could be improved if they could access the customer folder. There is a real "dead zone" between field and upper level staff on this issue.

RESPONSE: They have always been invited to our Toolkit training sessions, a few have attended. We can offer a training session specific to support personnel, if there is enough interest. We can grant them access to customer folders if they know what to do with it.

- **GENERAL COMMENTS:**

COMMENT: I would recommend that the Agency overall return to doing more general technical assistance, reduce the number of programs, and streamline our program processes. We are hampered by 3-6 month processes, such as the EQIP sign-up, ranking, and contracting process, and the CSP sign-up process. This has led us to become further program-driven. I still believe that our strength lies in our one-to-one contacts with our customers, but we are getting further from this every year. A majority of our customers now come into our offices in response to a program sign-up.

RESPONSE: There is momentum at the National level for a consolidation of NRCS programs and a re-emphasis of conservation planning as an incentive for program participation. Some of this requires program rule and/or legislative changes. There is serious talk of consolidating programs to one cost-share and one easement program with the next Farm Bill. Whether we get that far, remains to be seen. However, again the momentum is considerable for a reduction in the number of programs and a re-emphasis on conservation planning.

COMMENT: I would also like to see the Agency look into ways to close out the overall FSA-conservation compliance process that we are burdened with for an unforeseen period of time. We have massive amounts of file space and time taken up for compliance issues that may be of little or no concern in some offices, while being a large workload in others. Other programs, such as CRP, are considered a minor part of our workload from an overall NRCS perspective, while they may continue to be a large workload in some offices. For instance, at the present time we are handling a major influx of CRP grazing requests. This will take a large amount of time from my Field office, with little to report for our efforts.

RESPONSE: We have had our requirements for items such as “status reviews” reduced considerably for certain aspects of CRP (and compliance) of which we receive technical assistance funds. Each Area Conservationist should be monitoring workload to determine staffing support of ways to reduce workload.

COMMENT: Each truck should have basic supplies for land evaluation. These items should be fairly consistent from office to office. No matter what truck is used, one would know what to expect at a minimum in the truck tool boxes. How many times has an employee gotten out in the field and something expected to be in the tool box has been “borrowed” by another employee because only one was issued to the office? This costs money in personnel time and can look bad to our clients. A recommendation was made to develop a list of truck tool box items needed and supplied to each office.

RESPONSE: Agree – Area Conservationists will be asked to provide this list for our regular vehicle/equipment order.

COMMENT: Does the State office have plans to get us more updated/speedier computers in order to make us more efficient in getting our work done quicker? The problem is the amount of time it takes to produce a conservation plan for a producer, and develop a contract in CST, load it up into ProTracts and then report in PRS. I would suggest for us to get updated faster computers with better software programs in order to produce a professional product in a timely manner to give to our clients. If we can somehow get one software program or, even better yet, have all of the three current software programs talking better to each other (CST, ProTracts, and PRS) so that we only do data entry once, we can improve our work performance and get more conservation on the land and numbers for congress that we are actually efficient in getting our jobs done quicker.

RESPONSE: We have developed an aggressive four year plan to replace and upgrade all computers. The first phase was ordered in September 2006.

Message from the Resource Con for Technology:

> They are working on bringing the software applications closer together to reduce redundant data entry. ProTracts integration, phase I, was rolled out a week ago, allowing some progress reporting directly within ProTracts contracts. Phase II is

scheduled to be released at the start of FY07. The Areas received information on the integration and passed it on to the Field.

Making the applications work more efficiently and using it to produce a professional product is usually a training issue. We have offered Toolkit training opportunities, but they do need to attend and then apply what they are taught. At the training we discuss some optimization, i.e. keeping customer folders cleaned out of unneeded, excess data and using GIS data from copies on the hard drive to reduce some of the network traffic. If a system is unreasonably slow, ITS would be willing to check that the software is installed and operating correctly and that the network is working correctly. They do need to ask, before we can address specific concerns. We spend a lot of time at training on producing good products, including how to build templates to speed up the process. We point them to the Agency and commercial help documentation that has lots of good suggestions. Also, all Area Technology support staffs are available for in-office or one-on-one training, if requested.

We will continue to forward suggestions, and input to the National level. There is a National level “Business Tools Advisory Committee” that meets regularly to evaluate these suggestions and prioritize needs.